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The US and Gulf States Summit: What Next?

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The summit convened last week by US President Barack Obama with representatives of the Gulf states was designed to ease their concerns about the emerging agreement with Iran on the nuclear question, “compensate” them – in part through the supply of weapon systems – for the materialization of threats that will be posed by Iran as a recognized nuclear threshold state, and recruit support for the agreement. These goals were achieved, if only partially and temporarily.

The unwritten alliance linking the American liberal democracy and the absolute monarchies in the Gulf was based on the principle of action by the monarchies to stabilize the global energy market and support US interests in the region in exchange for protection by the US against external threats – generally while ignoring the inadequate political freedom and human rights in those countries. It was the Carter Doctrine that established the defense framework for relations between the US and the Gulf states. Underlying the policy was the US threat to use force, including military force, should any external power seek to attain hegemony in the Gulf. Since that time, the body of water from the Gulf of Oman through the Strait of Hormuz to Shatt al-Arab has been an “American lake.” In recent years, however, a continued American commitment in the Gulf region has been questioned. Meantime, the source of the gravest threat to the strategic balance in the Gulf is not external, but in the Gulf itself.

The US drive toward an agreement with Iran on the nuclear question, combined with its reduced dependence on oil from the Gulf, has put the relations between the US and the Gulf states to a new test. The royal houses fear the possibility of an Iranian-Western deal that will enable Iran to escape the isolation it has suffered since the nuclear crisis, while at the same time preserve its nuclear capabilities – in other words, a rapprochement between Iran and the West that will give Iran the status of a legitimate state among the nations of the world and enable it to enhance its influence in the Middle East, necessarily at the expense of the Gulf states. A gradual detente between the US and Iran that could develop after the signing of a nuclear treaty would deal a critical blow to the special relations between the Gulf states and the US. Furthermore, the monarchies are worried

that if and when the US achieves full energy independence, it will no longer need its Arab allies and will greatly reduce its involvement in the Middle East. The Gulf monarchs also fear an American strategic pivot, in accordance with the administration's declaration that East Asia heads the American list of priorities. However, it appears that the prevalent fear in the Gulf concerns an American pivot toward Iran.

In a *New York Times* interview before the summit, Obama said – for the first time – that the internal threats facing the Gulf states were at times more severe than those threats posed by Iran. He thereby lowered the expectations that the monarchs had from the summit, and perhaps also prompted the absence of some leaders from the meeting (only two of the six heads of state attended the summit). The cancellation by Saudi King Salman, which was known before the meeting, might have been due to his frail health, but it is also possible that it was, rather, an expression of dissatisfaction and growing frustration with what is perceived in Riyadh as a mistaken American policy toward Iran. Riyadh believes that Washington is shutting its eyes to Iranian subversion in the region, which inter alia has a direct negative impact on Saudi Arabian national security.

The most threatening scenario for the Arab monarchies is that while the US focus is elsewhere, on East Asia, for example, Iran, with its new status, will strengthen its grip in the Gulf region. In the eyes of the Gulf states, the current US administration is willing to give Iran the “keys” to the region. Recognized as a nuclear threshold state by the agreement being formulated, Iran will find it easier to dictate the political-security agenda both in the region and throughout the Middle East. The possible consequences of any concrete development in this direction will also affect the future of inter-Arab cooperation and the Arab political frameworks. Various countries, certainly some of the vulnerable Gulf states, will likely seek closer relations with Iran, while others will be driven to rely on the US. Indeed, the security options currently available to the Arab monarchies are limited. While their economic future is closely connected to China, the burden of preserving their security still falls on the US. The problems in the relations between the parties, however, as revealed in recent years, are liable to put in motion long term processes with negative consequences for regional stability, as well as for Israel's strategic interests. On the day after an agreement with Iran, and given the erosion of trust between Saudi Arabia and the US, the kingdom is liable to seek to mitigate risks by forming a parallel – albeit imperfect – set of relationships with other countries in order to improve its security. Of these possible relations, understandings with Pakistan on the nuclear question are a clear possibility.

The Gulf states have no interest in a significant deterioration in their relations with the US, since they will be the first to suffer. During the summit, Gulf representatives therefore expressed public support for the administration's goals with Iran. In the long term, however, the Gulf leaders can be expected to try to design a new framework of

relations with the US that will give those countries a larger degree of independence than they currently enjoy in managing their defense agenda – without full coordination with American interests and goals in the region. Even before any agreement with Iran, several Gulf states have already shown their readiness to take action in defense of their essential interest without the US, and furthermore, against its advice. The current bone of contention is the American effort at achieving a compromise agreement between the warring parties in Yemen, which contravenes Saudi Arabia's goals in its war against the Houthi rebels and the desire of Saudi Arabia (and Turkey) to increase military involvement in Syria with the aim of overthrowing the Assad regime.

The Gulf states are incapable on their own of creating a strategic balance with Iran, which is also important for their economic prosperity. It is doubtful, however, whether a supply of advanced American arms will create this essential balance. Furthermore, in view of the sale of advanced arms to the Gulf states, the Americans will find it difficult to continue criticizing the absence of political freedom and the ongoing denial of human rights in those countries, out of concern that such criticism will harm the sales sorely needed by the American economy. Furthermore, if the US is truly interested in strategic cooperation with the Gulf states, it must prove that even if it wants a nuclear agreement with Iran, it is unwilling for such an agreement to give Iran the green light to act as it wishes in the region. However, the administration may find it difficult to present such proof, since Iran will regard it as grounds for halting implementation of the agreement. Iran can use the threat of withdrawing from the agreement as a significant means of pressure. Indeed, in his summary remarks at the end of the summit, Obama stressed that military cooperation with the Gulf states would not be at Iran's expense.

Israel too faces a related dilemma. It is in Israel's interest for the US, through its military presence, to continue to generate the necessary strategic balance against Iranian power in the Gulf region. The sale of advanced weapons to the Gulf states, however, is expected to detract from the IDF's qualitative edge in the region.

The coming years will likely see a test of relations between the US and the Gulf states. These relations have already survived previous crises, particularly the severe crisis created by the events of September 11, 2001. Nonetheless, it is doubtful whether conciliatory declarations and the sale of advanced weapons will be enough to put the relations back on track and alleviate the monarchies' anxiety about what they view as the mistaken strategic direction pursued by the US toward Iran, Syria, Egypt, and the Palestinian issue. To be sure, Gulf figures at the summit smiled for the cameras and read from the agreed text; they are unlikely to publicly express their dissatisfaction with the administration's policy, or to speak before both houses of Congress. However, they can be expected to continue acting to attain their respective goals, even if these run counter to American policy.

Expectations of the summit were low, yet even so, it is questionable whether they were achieved. The Gulf states left the summit with only half of their wish list filled. Some of them hoped to receive an official security undertaking from the administration, a type of classic defense pact. What they got, however, was more of the same – declarations of support and advanced weapons, which they still regard as not advanced enough. Several of the countries asked for the procurement of F-35 warplanes, but encountered an American refusal. Nevertheless, it would be mistaken to say that there was no point in holding the summit. At work is a process, and the summit is only one stage. It is possible that the summit contributed to an understanding by the administration that it must devise a policy to roll back Iranian involvement in various fronts in the Middle East. Such a policy, if pursued effectively, will enable the Gulf states to ride out the remainder of the Obama administration's term – an administration with which they disagree about almost every issue in the Middle East in general, and the Gulf in particular.

